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ON THE END OF HISTORY & THE DEATH OF DESIRE (NOTES ON TIME AND NEGATIVITY IN BATAILLE'S 'LETTRE A X.')

PHILOFICTION ABOLITION, BATAILLE, DESIRE, KOJÈVE, NEGATIVITY, TIME

To continue from our conclusions regarding the question of what it would mean to love as a communist, we begin from the idea that *abolition* is what necessary binds communism as real movement to problems encountered in the life of desire, of the heart, of the family. And one key consequence of this would be the following: if communism as the real movement that abolishes the present state of things that allows us to truly pose questions pertaining to sex, love, and family life, then *what we call the political and libidinal economy are revealed as inseparable and indelibly bound, each with the other*. Thus, says Bataille, ours is a time where desire's *libidinal* activity can no longer be thought of, and even more so understood, as independent of the base of capital's political economy. So, if last time we saw that questions of sex and love are revealed to be inherently socio-historical and not merely personal and private, then the very notion of desire is given a new, and hopefully truer, meaning. Moreover, this new understanding of the life of desire also brings about a shift in our theoretical and practical perspective – from a position that has been comfortable in thinking desire as solely belonging to pertaining to private (as opposed to public) life to a view that finds it impossible to think through problems of libidinal life independent of their socio-political and material determination.

Given this more nuanced position, however, we are still confronted by the following question: *what is the nature of desire in both its libidinal and politico-economic determination?* If it is said that, now, Desire's proper place as the 'base' and not 'superstructure', what, then, does this mean about Desire and its subjects? What kind of subjectivity is as political as it is libidinal such that it is simultaneously constituted by, while expressing itself through, the very forces and relations of production? This is to ask, in another way, about the meaning of a desire that is inherently irreducible to fantasy, dreams, or the physical act of sex?

Bataille & Kojève: A Meeting At The End of History

What is the nature of a desire that is both sexual and political; a desire that is at once psychic and socio-historical? On way of approaching the question of the sexual/psychic and political/socio-historical features of desire is that of Bataille; and particularly his treatment of desire in 'Lettre à X., chargé d'un cours sur Hegel.', a letter written to Kojève in light of his seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the Sorbonne. While Bataille's letter does not treat the question of libidinal economy explicitly, he does take up the question of desire as it is linked to negativity, and what a desire with negativity at its heart would mean for the

very notion of negation/negativity as such. And it is this treatment of desire's inherent negativity that is instructive for our purposes since the *abolition* that binds communism to problems of sex, love, and gender is a relation that has negation at its center. As Bataille writes with respect to Kojève's interpretation of the 'end of history':

In truth its no longer a matter of misfortune or life, only what has become of "negativity out of work", if it is true that it does become something. I am there in the forms which it engenders, forms not at the outset in myself but in others. Most often negativity without power becomes the work of art. In what concerns me, the negativity which belongs to me didn't give up work until that moment when there wasn't any work: the negativity of a man who has nothing more to do, not that of a man who prefers to talk. But the fact – which seems incontestable – that a negativity turned away from action would express itself as work of art is no less charged with meaning given the possibilities remaining to me. It shows that negativity can be objectified [...] the man of "negativity out of work"... He is in front of his own negativity as if before a wall. Whatever ill he suffers from this, our man knows that henceforth nothing can be avoided, for negativity has no issue. ('Lettre à X,' 49)

Our task, then, is to see whether or not Bataille has good reason to posit a relation between desire, negativity, and the fact that to love as a communist means to love via the real movement of abolition.

The Economy of Abolition; The Economy of Desire

If Bataille shows that the problem of interpreting Hegel's claim to an 'end of history' is not resolved with Kojève's call for the 're-animalization of Man.' Rather, if there is an 'end of history' it is a riddle solved in the attempt to delineate a different kind of negativity; one no longer tied to a notion of a productive activity that progressively attains its historical telos. Contra Kojève, what the end of history forces us to think is a negativity no longer characterized as laborious. The negativity of desire, at the end of history, has exhausted itself of all productivity and is thus left with nothing to do. As Bataille writes regarding this non-productive negativity of desire:

If the act (the "doing of things") is – as Hegel says – negativity, the question then arises as to whether the negativity of one who has "nothing more to do" disappears or is subsumed under "negativity out of work" [*négativité sans emploi*]. Personally I can only decide on the one sense, my own being exactly this "negativity out of work" (I could not define myself better). I wish Hegel had foreseen that possibility: at least didn't he put it at the outcome of the process he described. I imagine that my life – or its miscarriage, better still, the open wound my life is – this alone constitutes the refutation of Hegel's closed system. ('Lettre à X,' 48)

Desire as negativity *without work* is nothing but *desire unemployed*. If the essence of desire is this unemployed negativity, we are confronted with the paradox of imaging a desire whose particular products and effects are generated through non-productive means; a negativity that can only live and create by means other than that of a life lived according to the dictates of labor; *why does Bataille maintain that, at the end of history, Desire continues to be productive in spite of the fact that Desire can no longer continue to be the labor of negativity?*

As the editors of Bataille's letter helpfully clarify: "Bataille thinks this question [negativity] through by discussing what he terms *expenditure*. Expenditure may be either productive...or unproductive [and] ... it is to this second sense of expenditure that Bataille reserves the term 'expenditure' *sans phrase*" ('Lettre à X,' 47). It is for these reasons that Bataille will maintain that the end of history force's Desire to undergo a substantial transformation: the labor of the negative, and this negativity as productive activity, do not persist at history's end (and for Bataille this also means that if the labor of the negative was the motor of desire it was only because of historical and contingent factors). At the end of History, humanity isn't forced to re-naturalize itself into what is animal (à la Kojève). Rather, we are forced to find ways to live the new found life of negativity; that is, we are obliged to live a life no longer tied to labor or productive activity. With Bataille, it is as if the fate of humanity was to eventually see itself in a new light; as if, history was simply the first act in humanity's reckoning with itself as a negativity now *unemployed*; as if what is instantiated is a form of subjectivity whose very possibility for existing is now constituted by the simple fact that it has 'nothing more to do,' at History's end, then, the only thing we are left with is *Time*.

After History, Time

Now, with Bataille's interpretation of the real and Subjective consequences brought about by the 'end of History' two things are clear. *First*, we are able to understand that there exists the persistence of negativity after History; even if negativity will persist in an altogether different form and be of a different nature. *Second*, and this is what will become important for this section, the unemployed negativity of desire may have been born at History's closure but its life is lived in a world where there is 'nothing but Time.' So it seems that just as negativity persists after History, Time, too, continues on after History's closure. Thus it is this question of the Time that emerges at the end of History that is at issue since, it is our intuition that the negativity of non-productive expenditure does not simply belong to a world where there is nothing but Time. What is more, this negativity will be said to have its own form of Time proper to itself (and the least we can say is that, for Bataille, Time and History are said to exist independent of each other, since it is the only way by which History can be resolved while Time presses onward). However, if these two consequences that follow from Bataille's position are of any significance it is due to the fact that, when taken together, we begin to understand that the end of History doesn't mean the absolute exhaustion of Being and rather that *Time*

and *negativity* persist beyond History (and we should add to this that they accomplish this only on the condition that they are constituted by a *new* relation, which determines and guarantees their mutual persistence).

Putting aside, for the moment, other possible consequences we may draw from the contents of this letter, we can at the very least say that the implicit but crucial thesis of Bataille's letter is that of the ontological independence of Time and negativity from History. That is, if Time is said to be what determines non-productivity as the *form* Desire must take, it is only because the Desire, which comes at the end of History is the one that finds itself with "nothing left to do." This persistence of negativity, that is to say, of Desire, is forced to confront itself by virtue of its post-Historical circumstance as a form of Desire that has at its disposal, and when aiming to secure its persistence after History post-Historical existence, *nothing other than Time*. To be sure, at the end of History Desire does in fact die even though it is made to be reborn in the persistence of this unemployed negativity.

And if we were to inquire deeper into just what exactly this time of unemployed negativity could be, we quickly find ourselves returning to Marx; for it was Marx who already gave unemployed negativity a name when, in the *Grundrisse*, he spoke of *disposable-time* as a form of time that is irreducible to capital's division between labor- and leisure-time (where the real difference is between waged and unwaged labor). Moreover, says Marx, disposable-time reveals itself to be the real meaning of wealth since it implies the development of the capacities, knowledges, and well-being of society as a whole: 'For real wealth is developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather *disposable time*' (*Grundrisse*, tr. Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1973, 708). And lastly, we saw that disposable-time as the time of communism also made possible attempted resolutions to questions/problems of sex, gender, and love since those relations can be created and recreated without the threat to the material- and/or social well-being of those involved. Loving takes time, or at the very least learning to love takes time and it is an education the temporality of which must be disposable.

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